

**OLIVO E PASQUALE**  
 Opera in due Atti  
 Musica di G. Donizetti ridotta per  
 Piano-Forte



Gaetano Donizetti *Olivo e Pasquale* melodramma giocoso in due atti, libretto di Jacopo Ferretti. Teatro Coccia, Novara 11 November 1994.

"La prima piazza fu Novara. Il Coccia di Novara era, allora, un teatro dalle vecchie tradizioni; pubblico intenditore ed esigente." So said the polite Toti Dal Monte of an appearance there in 1939. The intervening years have only made a few changes. She never sang the role of Isabella in *Olivo e Pasquale*, alas, as she would have been perfect I suspect, no one in those days showed much interest in Donizetti *minore*, and so the esigente novarese missed a treat. The theatre, newly restored, is exceptionally elegant and charming, as indeed is the city itself, lined with classical arcades, with two utterly overwhelming churches – the one time perquisite of Maestro Coccia and before him of Mercadante and Generali, a city currently able to pride itself on being the home town of the President of Italy. Old traditions may not now weigh so heavily on the public of the Teatro Coccia, and though it may still be *intenditore* (expert) it was not very full on the evening under review, a great shame as the performance of Donizetti's rare opera was indeed expert, admirably prepared and staged, and a great credit to the Como Conservatorio who masterminded the whole thing it seems, making the revision from manuscript sources, setting it, costuming it, and singing it, as far as can be made out from the ample printed material.

In fact it was not the *prima piazza* for this *Olivo e Pasquale* as it had first been given at Como – two performances at the Teatro Sociale on 5th and 7th November under a Japanese/Italian series of student cultural exchanges (with an initial venue at the "Teatro Globe" in Tokyo on 22nd and 23rd October – how Donizetti would have marvelled at this exotic fare!). But these earlier performances were arguably more tentative, and by the time the opera reached Novara all the edges had been polished, the orchestral nuances honed to a nicety by the Orchestra Stabile di Como under Bruno Dal Bon.

But what a difficult opera it is. Poised between the Rossinian world and the burgeoning sensibility of romanticism, fantastically demanding vocally and instrumentally, with perplexing alternatives for the vocal casting brought about as a result of the *convenienze teatrali* of the opera's earlier fortunes, with the juvenile lead Camillo sometimes a contralto, with his rival Le Bross too having problems with his gender, with linguistic hurdles (Columella sometimes tricked-out in Neapolitan dialect), the opera only seems to have come to ground three years after its original Roman staging.

It was this 1830 Canobbiana staging which formed the vocal casting for these Como/Novara performances, some listeners may have been upset not to hear the rather charming *duetto* familiar on the only available recording which opens the opera with two seductive female voices, here there was an expansive aria for a tenor Camillo. At this point, this review finds itself in uncharted grounds – who, in fact was singing? Novara obligingly provided twin cast lists for their two performances where roles were to be swapped around as below:

|                                       |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Olivo, mercante                       | ANTONIO ABETE - GIANLUCA VALENTI      |
| Pasquale, suo fratello                | PIETRO GUARNERA - DOMENICO COLAIANNI  |
| Isabella, figlia di Olivo             | CARLA DI CENSO - MARIA PIA PISCITELLI |
| Camillo, giovine di negozio           | PAOLO SALA - LORENZO MARROCCU         |
| Monsieur Le Bross, mercante           | TERIGE SIROLI - PAOLO SALA            |
| Columella, povero gentiluomo italiano | DOMENICO COLAIANNI - PIERO GUARNERA   |
| Matilde, cameriera d'Isabella         | GABRIELLA SBORGI - GABRIELLA SBORGI   |
| Diego, servo di casa                  | GIANLUCA VALENTI - ANTONIO ABETE      |

but no amount of enquiry, either on the spot, or subsequently, has been able to establish *who exactly* was singing as the roles were taken by the same artists on both occasions! I suppose we shall find out when Arkadia releases their recording, all I came say here is that Olivo was sung by an ample bass with a resonant young voice and good stage presence, Pasquale *ditto* – tone a little scrawnier but with such admirable velocity that he carried everything before him. Isabella was a tiny bit acid in places, but with increasing ease began to display a fine florid technique which carried the opera to its roller-coaster rondo in superb form. Le Bross sang sweetly and engagingly and won the tenorial stakes on this occasion, if not the bride Olivo had lined up for him. Columella was given to a buffo of real accomplishment, already in full command of his means, he over-acted rather, somewhat chaplinesque, but made much of a role which is patently superfluous to the plot. Matilde, the maid, was under-parted, her excellent prestation will take her far in comic opera; Diego doddered around as is required. The problem lay with poor Camillo; he looked good, but was stymied by the two ferocious arias the composer wished upon him in this version, the first aria was well taken despite an uneasy patch or two, the second – the Act II number, courted disaster as, increasingly nervous and scarcely allowed to breathe by a conductor who was paying more attention to the rapid pacing of the cabaletta, left him stranded in the most awkward part of the tenor register – sadly intimidating to a young singer, but I hope he is not put off as a result.

The settings and costumes were perfectly in period (what a blessing); the coro well positioned and organised; the action open – extending into the stalls – the fortepiano continuo an adroit contributor to the comedy.

And what of the opera? It is mostly comedy, the Donizettian *faible* (if that it what it is) for emotion not yet much in evidence. Based on a play by Simeone Antonio Sografi of 1794 with the same title it has a strong whiff of Goldoni and is shallow enough except for the marvellous confrontation of the two brothers which brings out the best in both the librettist and composer. Given an honest and good-hearted romp like this at Novara, it is both admirable entertainment and something more; a glimpse of a great composer moving into second gear with perfect ease.

Alexander Weatherson

